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The Commodification of Helen: Tracing the Phallic Economy of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Department of English from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Introduction

*“Who could blame either the Trojans or Greeks
For suffering so long for a woman like this”
— Iliad III.164-5*

In one of her earliest appearances in Homer’s *Iliad*, Helen stands atop a parapet with the Trojan elders. She looks down on the battlefields where the men of Greece, her homeland, have been fighting those of Troy, her adoptive country, for nine years—fighting, ostensibly, to possess her. Wrapped up in this conflict are countless other desires. The soldiers below Helen fight for their own renown, for the honor of their countries, and for the symbolic value that possessing Helen confers upon not only an individual man, but upon a nation of them. In all of this, Helen remains suspended above the fray, looking down from the wall. Homer, at least, leaves her role in this conflict uncertain, refusing to resolve the matter of Helen’s culpability. But the question lingers in the background: did she do it? Did she willfully elope with Paris to Troy or was she blamelessly abducted? How much agency does Helen really have?

The Iliadic Helen, in all of her legendary beauty and, in Mihoko Suzuki’s words, “radical undecidability,” sets the stage for a series of revisions of Helen to follow (Suzuki 18). The questionably domesticated Helen of the *Odyssey* gives way to Virgil’s demonic Helen in the *Aeneid*, crouching among the ruins of Troy, who in turn leads to Geoffrey Chaucer’s ethereal Eleyne and then William Shakespeare’s lascivious Helen in *Troilus and Cressida* over two thousand years later. Even today, reimaginings of the Trojan narrative and its paragon of physical attractiveness continue to surface, as in Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad* (2001) or Pat Barker’s *Silence of the Girls* (2018). The very ambiguity of Homer’s original Helen yields a

fascination with this woman poised at the center of the Trojan conflict and yet somehow consistently hovering just above it, slightly out of reach. Many of these authors find themselves preoccupied with resolving her ambiguities through diverse methods and with varying success.

I will start by examining Helen's classical past, beginning with her portrayal in Homer's *Iliad* as the initial archetype of Helen. Having established this original image, I will look first at the ways in which Homer and other ancient Greek writers began the process of revising Helen. Homer's *Odyssey* marks the beginning of the revisionist narratives, as it revises Helen's character according to the domestic framework of this second epic. Other ancient Greek writers, such as Stesichorus, Euripides, and Herodotus, begin a tradition of doubling and splitting Helen's character, often with the aim of purifying her reputation. Norman Austin, in his book *Helen of Troy and Her Shameless Phantom*, explores this trend of the dual Helen, comprised of her innocent true self on the one hand and on the other, her evil perfect likeness, her *eidolon* that wreaks havoc in Troy. This division of Helen's character persists into the Early Modern period.

In classical Latin literature and during the Middle Ages, various other authors continue to reinterpret the Trojan narrative as well as Helen herself, providing a rich background from which Shakespeare draws in writing *Troilus and Cressida*. Virgil's *Aeneid* also attempts to resolve Helen's ambiguities, but tends in the other direction, demonizing Homer's nuanced woman. Ovid, in his satirical *Heroides*, allows Helen a voice, through which she provides perverse commentary regarding her levels of culpability and agency. In the medieval period, Chaucer's poem *Troilus and Criseyde* draws from a line of romances to give us the narrative from which Shakespeare borrowed most directly.

Moving forward to the Early Modern period, I will examine Helen's appearances not only in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, but also in Christopher Marlowe's moralizing play

Doctor Faustus, another important source for Shakespeare's work. Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare is evident in the many lines and themes that Shakespeare borrows from *Doctor Faustus*, and thus Marlowe's interpretation of Helen serves as an important element coloring my reading of Shakespeare's Helen. Unlike those writing before them, both Marlowe and Shakespeare choose to definitively resolve the issue of Helen's agency in leaving Greece, characterizing her arrival in Troy as a rape or nonconsensual abduction. Although they take away her agency, both authors continue to hold her responsible for the carnage at Troy, raising questions about the nature of female agency itself.

In order to discuss Helen's agency (or lack thereof) throughout her literary appearances ranging from Homer's *Iliad* (8th century BC) to Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (1602), we must first establish a more specific understanding of the term "agency." In her 2001 article "Language and Agency," linguistic anthropologist Laura Ahearn aims to provide a survey of the scholarship on agency, create a skeletal definition for the concept, and emphasize the importance of looking at language and linguistic form when studying agency (Ahearn 109). In terms of this provisional definition, Ahearn suggests that "agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (112). This theory of agency, then, stresses the importance of sociocultural mediation, which refers to the "social nature of agency and the pervasive influence of culture on human intentions, beliefs, and actions" (114). In elaborating on her definition of agency, Ahearn contrasts it with one that the field of philosophy often relies on—that is, the equation of free will and agency. Philosophers who subscribe to philosophy's prevalent "action theory," which distinguishes between action and event, often argue that agency requires merely a mental state or awareness of "intention," "reason," or "responsibility," to name a few (114). Ahearn counters that these requirements do not go far enough. In her view, this definition proves problematic

because it frequently ignores the sociocultural aspects that she considers central to determining one's agency. Thus, in order to determine whether or not Helen has agency in a given text, or even has the possibility of agency, we must look at the social parameters established within that text. For instance, the social code that determines allocation of agency in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* is influenced by both Early Modern gender politics and heroic values inherited from classical epic tradition.

Further, Helen's decreased agency in Shakespeare's and Marlowe's works allows for her commodification in the masculine economies of these texts. I use the term *performative economies of masculinity* to describe these systems of transaction involving male exchange of women, not only as objects but also as symbols, conferring abstract values upon the men participating in these sexual economies and thus constructing their masculinities. Shakespeare's *Troilus*, for instance, considers Helen a "theme of honour and renown," ascribing her worth to the abstractions that she can passively confer upon the men who possess her (II.ii.99). Women can only function as such tokens, however, when they remain within the bounds of an idealized passive femininity that considers agency a masculine trait and thus aims to deprive women of this feature. In the sexual economies of *Troilus and Cressida* and *Doctor Faustus*, Helen functions as a symbol rather than a woman. Both Shakespeare and Marlowe reduce Helen to an abstraction, an icon exchanged by men. In limiting Helen's personal agency while simultaneously demonizing her for her sexuality, both authors grapple with the relationship between femininity and agency. Their similar portrayals of Helen highlight the crippling nature of an idealized Early Modern femininity that condemns female sexuality and demands submission to the social masculine economies of the period.

Chapter One: Classical Beginnings

*“I can make you repulsive to both sides, you know,
Trojans and Greeks, and then where will you be?”
— Iliad III. 444-5*

In the *Iliad*, Helen of Troy occupies a series of liminal positions, straddling the worlds of goddess and mortal, shamed and shameless, victim and perpetrator. In her book *Metamorphoses of Helen*, Mihoko Suzuki argues that the Helen of the *Iliad* is marked by “radical undecidability,” an ambiguity that will preoccupy later authors as they attempt to resolve Helen’s contradictions (Suzuki 18). Homer’s nuanced portrayal of the woman at the center of the war will go on to be deconstructed and reassembled by subsequent authors and playwrights from his own time through Shakespeare’s, but his initial model of a complex Helen serves as the framework from which these other Helens will grow.

Homer paints Helen not only as the epitome of physical beauty, but also as a multidimensional character attributed varying degrees of responsibility regarding the war, whose actions often contradict her statements, and who, plagued by guilt and shame, engages in frequent self-deprecation and lamentation over her situation. In establishing a surface characterization of Helen centered around her iconic good looks, Homer relies on abstract epithets and comparisons to the immortals rather than directly describing her features. In the *Iliad*, “white-armed Helen” (*Il.* III. 125) parallels the epithet of “Hera, the white-armed goddess” (*VIII.* 389). Similarly, “Helen, Zeus’ child” (*III.* 212) mirrors “Aphrodite, Zeus’ daughter” (*III.* 400). Both of these comparisons to the goddesses, whose beauty as immortals trumps all others’, illustrate the scale of Helen’s allure without describing any specific quality. As a daughter of

Zeus who has “the sky’s brightness reflected in her mortal face” (III.179), Helen carries some of his immortal aura with her, and Homer frequently mentions her elegance. When Helen appears in the *Iliad* approaching a group of Trojan elders perched on the wall overlooking the battle, the old men immediately note her attractiveness: ““who could blame either the Trojans or Greeks /for suffering so long for a woman like this?”” they ask (III.164-5). This statement not only reflects the prevailing acceptance of Helen’s nearly inconceivable beauty, but also captures the connection between her looks and her central role, and perhaps responsibility, in causing the Trojan War—a connection that Homer weaves tightly into Helen’s character.

The theme of blame and responsibility furthers Homer’s complex and comparatively sympathetic representation of Helen. Throughout the *Iliad*, characters attribute blame for the Trojan War to varied sources and often question the degree of Helen’s personal responsibility, creating an ongoing conversation that Homer uses to deepen her character. Three major players arise in this discussion of culpability: Paris, the Gods, and Helen. Hector decries Paris for taking Helen from Menelaus and her native land of Greece, calling him “nothing but trouble for [his] father and [his] city,” and in doing so charging him with catalyzing the war’s destruction (*Il.* III. 53-5). Most characters, however, blame the immortals and fate. Paris responds to his brother, telling him not to “throw golden Aphrodite’s gifts in [his] face,” suggesting an aspect of inescapability in his affair with Helen—and the resulting conflict—by implying that the gods fostered it (III. 68). Similarly, Priam tells his daughter-in-law that she is “not to blame /for this war with the Greeks. The gods are” (III.172-3). Aphrodite also appears in person to manipulate Helen when she tries to avoid going back to Paris’ bed:

“Don’t vex me, bitch, or I may let go of you
And hate you as extravagantly as I love you now.
I can make you repulsive to both sides, you know,
Trojans and Greeks, and then where will you be?”

Helen was afraid...
(*Il.* III.442-6)

In this interaction, Helen lacks agency in its simplest form due to the fear that Aphrodite imposes and her need to remain prized in the eyes of both the Trojans and Greeks. As he does with many deities in the epic, Homer gives Aphrodite a physical presence that highlights the magnitude of her immortal involvement, lessening the degree to which Helen appears responsible for her own actions, as the Olympians complicate the bounds of free will. In magnifying godly influence and putting Helen in a precarious position of dependence on Aphrodite, Homer creates a cultural framework in the *Iliad* that casts doubt on the possibility of individual free will, and more specifically, on the possibility of Helen's agency.

Helen, however, articulates a notably different opinion of herself, and sometimes a contradictory one. She repeatedly implicates herself in responsibility for the war, apologizing to Hector that he must bear "such a burden /for [her] wanton ways and Paris' witlessness" (*Il.* VI. 373-4) and speaking of her "shame and disgrace" at her infidelity (III. 259). In coming to terms not only with her role in her adultery, but also her degree of responsibility in the death and destruction accompanying to the Trojan War, Helen manifests consistent shame and guilt, which she expresses through self-deprecation. She first appears in the *Iliad* weaving "the trials that the Trojans and Greeks had suffered /for her beauty under Ares' murderous hands" into a red fabric, showing her awareness (to at least some degree) of her responsibility for the events she depicts (*Il.* III.127-130). She also indicates a wish that "a windstorm had swept [her] away to a mountain /or into the waves of the restless sea, /swept [her] away before all this could happen" (III. 362-65); at Hector's funeral, she laments that she "should have died first" (XXIV.818). These expressions of guilt and regret mirror her continuous self-deprecation, as she calls herself "a scheming, cold-blooded bitch" (III.361) and a "shameless bitch" (III.190). Still, she exculpates

herself from direct association with the war itself, stating that “the gods have ordained these evils” (VI. 366). These varying opinions about Helen’s culpability as well as her own shifting perspective on her fault contribute to Helen’s guilt complex, a trait that largely dominates Homer’s characterization of her.

Despite the prevailing theme of shame and guilt around which Helen’s portrayal largely revolves, Homer allows her to transcend the stereotype of the beautiful woman who puts herself down. He accomplishes this end by allowing her scattered bouts of defiance, a deep-seated concern for her reputation, and certain contradictory actions. Although Aphrodite eventually scares her into submission, Helen attempts to stand up to the goddess’ demands:

“You eerie thing, why do you love
Lying to me like this? Where are you taking me now?
Phrygia? Beautiful Maeonia? Another city
Where you have some other boyfriend for me?”
(*Il.* III.427-30)

Helen’s brusque, irritated manner in dealing with her superior shows her fiery, strong side. These traits appear again when she says to Paris “you should have died out there, /beaten by a real hero, my former husband” (*Il.* III. 456-7). Helen’s lack of compliance in these situations deepens her character. Her concerns about her reputation add to the depth of Homer’s portrait, as he ascribes alternate motives to Helen for some of her actions. In her conversation with Aphrodite, she contends that “it would be treason /to share [Paris’] bed. The Trojan women /would hold me at fault. I have enough pain as it is” (III. 438-40). Upon Hector’s death, she weeps that “there is no one left /in all wide Troy who will pity me /or be my friend. Everyone shudders at me” (XXIV.828-30). Both quotations illustrate her preoccupation with gaining the favor of others, increasing the range of her possible motivations.

In the *Iliad*, Homer creates a nuanced, multidimensional Helen of Troy, generating an archetype that later authors will transform to suit their own ends. Hallmarks of Homer's Helen include her guilt, shame, and self-deprecation, along with her bits of defiance and contradictions, all of which stem from the relationship between her revered beauty and her level of culpability in the Trojan War. Importantly, as Norman Austin argues, this nuanced portrayal sets Helen apart from other women in the epic, marking her as "conspicuously different" (Austin 24). In *Helen of Troy and Her Shameless Phantom*, Austin insists on Helen's privileged position in the epic economy of masculinity and honor, arguing that in this, her earliest form, she avoids the commodification that other women experience:

On one side Homer places the other commodities for which men fight—horses, bronze, chariots, breastplates, greaves, silver, gold, slaves male and female. But Helen belongs in an economic category of her own. If we take the Helen tradition as a whole, we see that Helen, though often captured, is not, never was, and never will be a slave. Of all the woman in the *Iliad*, Helen alone escapes the slavery in store for the others. (Austin 24)

While Austin makes an important point that Helen does not experience the same *type* of commodification that her fellow women face, the epic economy manipulates her in other ways. The ambiguity and liminality that define the Helen of the *Iliad* render her separate, but not entirely excluded from the constant exchange of tokens of honor that pervade male interaction. For example, the Greek men subject Helen's literary double Briseis to literal and dehumanizing commodification as a woman exchanged between men, but Helen herself is valued more as symbol than as woman, as necessitated by the text's performative economy of masculinity.

The first book of the *Iliad*, in which Agamemnon and Achilles squabble over the captive Briseis, mimics the Trojan War in miniature, presenting us with a quintessential example of the mechanics of the male-driven economy of masculinity that we see in epic tradition. In *Metamorphoses of Helen*, Mihoko Suzuki notes that this feud displays the ways in which women

are used as symbols to define and structure the male community. In this initial conflict, Homer “presents two contrasting but overlapping ways in which men ascribe value to women—as wife and as *geras*, signifier of prestige” (Suzuki 24). Briseis, standing in for Helen in this microcosmic universe, displays a “varying significance among her male captors [which] finds its parallel in Helen’s uncertain value as an object of the war” (29). The only possible resolution to this conflict involves “fixing the meaning of the unruly female signifier”; when Achilles and Agamemnon make up, they restore Briseis to a singular symbolic meaning (25). Suzuki goes on to characterize this male-driven economy in saying that “this objectification and then exchange of woman as signifier transforms male rivals into allies; such exchanges of woman are analogous to the scapegoating of women, which also seeks to establish community among males” (25). Here, an important difference arises between Briseis’ story and Helen’s. While Homer resolves the conflict over Briseis in the course of the epic and stabilizes her symbolic meaning, the *Iliad* closes before the end of the Trojan war and Helen’s restoration to the Greeks. Thus, Helen’s symbolic significance is not resolved, and she remains in a liminal position. The Briseis episode highlights how the male-driven economy of masculinity, which undergirds the epic genre and persists long after in other literary forms, necessitates the definition of women into clear-cut categories, leaving no room for women like Helen who seem to transcend such neat classification. Suzuki argues that in “the *Iliad*, not only does Helen cross the boundary between nations, she crosses a more absolute boundary, that between the world of women and the world of men” (Suzuki 19). This ambiguous status, the “radical undecidability” that characterizes Helen’s literary debut, makes her especially challenging to the male economy in the *Iliad*.

The *Odyssey* marks the beginning of revisionist narratives of Helen, as it reformulates the trials of the *Iliad* through a domestic lens, reframing Helen’s character according to these new

stipulations. While the *Iliad* ended before the conclusion of the Trojan War, the *Odyssey* takes place nine years later. As Austin points out, this epic gives us a Helen whose “status has been resolved. She is not wife and mistress, but simply a wife; not Greek and Trojan, but simply Greek” (Austin 72). This resolution appears tangibly in Helen’s comparisons to goddesses. In the *Iliad*, Homer compares her to Hera and Aphrodite, a symbol of sexual lust, while in the *Odyssey*, he instead describes her as “striking as Artemis with her golden shafts,” a symbol of chastity (*Od.IV.135*). Suzuki echoes this idea, noting that “this shift in association from Aphrodite to Artemis seems to signal Helen’s transformation from a woman of passion to a chaste wife”—Helen’s reinstated chastity takes the form of her newfound marital fidelity (Suzuki 64). Still, Homer maintains the dualities present in Helen from the *Iliad*, as she once again straddles the mortal and immortal worlds.

Helen’s inherent duality and double-edged nature surfaces most prominently in the *Odyssey* through the contesting stories that she and Menelaus share about the Trojan horse, an episode that we experience only secondhand through these tales. Helen tells of how she had remained loyal to the Greeks and had heard of their strategies from Odysseus. After telling her story of bathing Odysseus in Troy, Helen claims that “The rest of the Trojan women shrilled their grief. /Not I: my heart leapt up—my heart had changed by now—I yearned /to sail back home again!” (*Od.IV.291-3*). As Suzuki argues, although her tale “intends to be self-congratulatory,” highlighting her commitment to the eventual victors, Helen’s professed allegiance also “entails a problematic betrayal of the Trojans: her rejoicing over the deaths of Trojan warriors in the midst of the bewildered and grieving Trojan women casts a sinister light on her loyalty, the very quality that she intends to illustrate by her story” (Suzuki 68). Further, Helen drugs the wine at the dinner table in this scene with a *pharmakon*, allowing her to keep the

guests from shedding tears and forcibly lighten the atmosphere. Suzuki points out that the *pharmakon* episode likewise illustrates Helen's duality, as her pharmaceutical powers not only place her close to the immortals and sorceresses of the *Odyssey*, like Circe and Calypso, but also give her a level of control from which she verbally balks at other points in the epic (70). For instance, Helen shifts blame from herself onto the immortals even as she laments the destruction at Troy:

I grieved too late for the madness
Aphrodite sent to me, luring me there, far from my dear land
forsaking my own child, my bridal bed, my husband too,
a man who lacked neither brains nor beauty
(*Od.*IV.293-6)

In her statement that Aphrodite sent the "madness" that caused her to leave Greece with Paris, Helen distances herself from any sort of culpability. The combination of reassigning blame and asserting control, as in the *pharmakon* incident, confirm Helen's oscillating status between passive victim and active perpetrator.

Menelaus' story in this scene similarly emphasizes Helen's problematic duplicity as he recasts her role in the Trojan horse plot:

when along you came, Helen—roused, no doubt
by a dark power bent on giving Troy some glory,
and dashing prince Deiphobus squired your every step.
Three times you sauntered round our hollow ambush,
feeling, stroking its flanks,
challenging all our fighters, calling each by name—
yours was the voice of all our long-lost wives!
(*Od.*IV.307-13)

Despite Austin's arguments for the resolution of Helen's Iliadic ambiguity in her status as both wife and mistress, both Trojan and Greek, Menelaus' story highlights her ongoing liminality and transcendence of easy categorization. As Suzuki points out, Menelaus' tale "demonstrates her almost supernatural ability to enchant and beguile—as her *pharmakon* allows her to do. Her

allure, coupled with her impersonation of the warriors' wives, links her to Calypso and Circe, who through similar means attempt to divert Odysseus from his true wife" (Suzuki 69). Even as Helen has now been restored as the wife of Menelaus alone, Homer reminds us that she has previously acted as the wife of multiple men; she resists a singular categorization. Not only *is* Helen the "long-lost" wife of Menelaus, she also multiplies that position in mimicking the voices of all the Greek wives. Further, Menelaus' reference to "the dashing prince Deiphobus" calls attention to Helen's series of husbands, as legends say she marries Deiphobus, another Trojan prince, after Paris dies and before the war ends. Thus, Helen manages to exhibit doubleness even within the monolithic category of wife. She is not just one wife, but many wives; she cannot be defined as the wife of one man even within the domestic framework of the *Odyssey*. While Austin views the Helen of the *Odyssey* as "the domesticated Helen, as a foil to the undomesticated Helen of the *Iliad*," I would instead argue that Homer's ostensible domestication of Helen is a superficial pretense (Austin 19). I agree with Austin, however, that "later authors would work to resolve the doubleness, but Homer insists on it" (83). While Homer expresses Helen's dualities more subtly in this second epic, they remain prominent and characteristic of the Homeric Helen in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Other Greek writers, however, engage in a much more total revision of Helen and her dual nature. Gregory Nagy argues that mythic and poetic traditions portray two versions of Helen: the "sacred" and the "profane" (Nagy in Austin xii). The profane version, in which Helen shamefully leaves for Troy with Paris, prevails as the Pan-Hellenic myth. As evidenced by the duality and liminality that Helen exhibits in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Homer invokes aspects of both the sacred and the profane in his portrayal. In response, "rejectionist poetics," like those of Stesichorus in his *Palinode*, often change the myth of Helen to take a more sympathetic view

of her, aligning themselves with the sacred side of the tradition (xii). In order to portray Helen sympathetically, the Ancient Greek lyrical poets and playwrights tend to isolate the sacred aspects of Helen's story by separating her into two bodies: her actual, pure self and her demonic ghost, or *eidolon*, who wreaks havoc in Troy while the real Helen is hidden away. Adriana Raducanu summarizes this anti-Homeric tradition as "an impressive body of literature that aims at restoring Helen's purity and wifely virtue by keeping her safely in hiding while an identical double suffered the fate that Homer had ascribed her in his epic" (Raducanu 23). A short synopsis of some of the most relevant revisions of Helen's story by the ancient Greeks reveals the extent of Helen's classical split, a phenomenon that continues through the Early Modern period in Britain, appearing in alternate form in Shakespeare's and Marlowe's works.

Stesichorus, Herodotus, and Euripides all revise the Helen myth, each expanding on the role of the *eidolon*, and its separation from real, bodily Helen, whom they thus enable to retain purity and blamelessness. As Austin notes, the full text of Stesichorus' *Palinode* has been lost, but Plato includes three verses in the *Phaedrus* (Austin 95). In Plato, Socrates quotes the supposed proem of the *Palinode*: "The story is not true /You did not board the well-benched ships, /You did not reach the towers of Troy" (95). The "you" in question here refers to Helen, whom Stesichorus ostensibly offended in an earlier ode that adhered more closely to the Homeric story, and to whom he now apologizes in this subsequent ode as he attempts to tell the "true" story of her plight (94). Although we do not know much about Helen's treatment in the *Palinode* as a whole, Austin points out that Stesichorus was the first to use the strategy of the *eidolon* as a way to sanctify Helen and revise her narrative (109). Paradoxically, Austin argues that while Stesichorus aimed to "eliminate the oscillation of Helen's twofold *logos* by reducing it to one" centered around her purity rather than her falsity, he actually reaffirmed the doubleness of Helen

that pervades Homer (115). Austin notes that the ideal Helen of the *Palinode* would not “be any longer both wife and mistress, or both Greek and Trojan. She would be all Greek, and a wife plain and simple, with her deadly gaze and her wayward libido displaced onto her idol. Helen, divested of all false projections, would be a whole woman at last” (115). While Stesichorus did not invent the doubleness of Helen, as Homer had already articulated her duality, his introduction of the *eidolon*, or phantom, onto which he projects Helen’s falsities and libido cements his position as a key player in the tradition of splitting Helen.

Raducanu points out that Herodotus, writing about a hundred years later, adds another element to the revised Helen myth: the Helen in Egypt conceit. Essentially, Herodotus tells us that Paris did capture Helen and elope with her, but then shipwreck stranded the two of them in Egypt (Raducanu 25). In Egypt, the pharaoh confiscates Helen and sends Paris home empty-handed. As Austin notes, the Greeks, “ignorant of the new complication in the plot,” nevertheless embarked for Troy to pursue Paris and Helen, and did not believe that the Trojans did not have her when they arrived. As a result, they still waged the ten years of war and destroyed Troy, only to find no trace of Helen (Austin 121). This version of the story is particularly interesting in its displacement of Helen; although a literal demonic *eidolon* does not take Helen’s place at Troy, as in Stesichorus, the Trojans and Greeks fought over a similarly elusive prize, a symbol rather than a woman. Austin points out that Euripides makes a further revision to Helen’s tale in a tragedy aptly titled *Helen*. In this version, real Helen is in Egypt *and* phantom Helen is in Troy. Paris kidnaps the *eidolon* of Helen from Sparta and brings it with him to Troy, while the gods place the true Helen in the protective custody of Proteus in Egypt (147). The tension here arises in the congruence between Helen and her *eidolon*, whom she must eventually confront, and whose actions still reflect poorly on the real Helen in the perfect resemblance between the two halves of

this woman (187). Although each of these three authors intends to reduce Helen into a singular, purified vessel, they only succeed in continuing to splinter her further, multiplying and complicating her image with each new iteration of Helen.

Chapter Two: Helen in Roman and Medieval Writers

*“Any girl might long for your embrace.
But may it be another who is free,
Before adultery disgraces me!”*

— *Heroides* XVII. 94-96

Following Homer, ancient Greek writers including Stesichorus, Herodotus, and Euripides doubled and split Helen’s character in order to purify her reputation. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil exhibits a similar pattern of splitting Helen, but he has the differing aim of emphasizing her villainy. While Helen appears infrequently in Virgil’s work, he portrays her in an extremely negative manner during his retelling of the final invasion of Troy. First, Aeneas provides a monologue about Helen’s treachery when he sees her at Vesta’s altar in Book II of the *Aeneid*:¹

The daughter of Tyndareus. Glare of fires
Lighted my steps this way and that, my eyes
Glancing over the whole scene, everywhere.
That woman, terrified of the Trojans’ hate
For the city overthrown, terrified too
Of Danaan vengeance, her abandoned husband’s
Anger after years—Helen that Fury,
Both to her own homeland and Troy, had gone
To earth, a hated thing, before the altars.
Now fires blazed up in my own spirit—
A passion to avenge my fallen town
And punish Helen’s whorishness.

(*Aen.* II.573-84)

¹ This particular passage is controversial in terms of its Virgilian authorship. These lines do not exist in manuscript editions of the text presented by Virgil’s literary executors Varius and Tucca, so many scholars believed them to be an interpolation based especially on their potential contradiction with Deiphobus’ account of the sack of Troy in *Aeneid* VI (Shipley 172). Further, Perkins notes that “questions arise about this passage because there is no reference to the [Helen episode in book II] prior to Servius in the 5th century, and the credibility of Servius has been called into question” (Perkins 108). However, many feel that Virgil did author these lines but then asked Varius and Tucca to omit them. Meredith Prince echoes this opinion and considers the contradictions between Aeneas’ and Deiphobus’ accounts of Helen’s final night in Troy merely a matter of the characters’ differing perspectives (Prince 189). Having considered the opinions of various scholars, I will treat this passage as authentic.

In his diatribe, Aeneas delays naming Helen, using only her patronymic “daughter of Tyndareus” and generic terms such as “that woman.” These phrases distance the reader from Helen herself, allowing Aeneas’ monologue to reflect back on women more generally, emphasizing Helen’s status as not only an unfaithful woman herself, but also a symbol of all wanton women, a trope that Virgil inherited from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and plays with here. When Aeneas does name Helen, he pairs it with the descriptor “that Fury,” highlighting a link between Helen and these female mythological figures that continues through Chaucer and into the literature of the Early Modern period. This connection to the Furies also aligns with a Greek tradition linking women to a dual type of speech in which they have the ability to both tell truth and imitate truth perfectly.

In her article *Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought*, Ann Bergren discusses how the idea of dichotomous female speech stemmed from the Muses and is also linked to other mythological female figures. Bergren argues that the Muses hold the ultimate knowledge in their ability to speak both in truth and fiction, as “the ability to falsify implies command of the truth” (Bergren 70). The Fates and female oracles present examples of women as “prophets and teachers, voices of truth,” whereas the sirens, who lure men to their deaths by singing exactly what they want to hear, as well as goddesses like Aphrodite and Hera, who use their female sexuality to deceive, display women as “tricky, alluring imitators in words” (70). Bergren explains that the prevailing belief in early Greek thought was that “most women are, like the Muses, capable of both modes,” and can speak in both perfect truths and perfect fictions, which becomes problematic when these truths and fictions are indistinguishable (70). She concludes that male writers attribute this perceived “capacity for double speech, for both truth and the imitation of truth, a paradoxical speech” to women in Greek literature via the writers’ culturally-influenced constructs of femininity (71). In linking Helen to the Furies, Virgil not only positions

her in hell, but also links her to the type of mythological female creature that contributes to these perceptions of women and their speech. Nevertheless, despite capitalizing on Helen's potential for duality, and thus duplicity, Virgil aims to define Helen herself more clearly, reserving his manifestation of Helen's duality for her literary doubles Dido and Lavinia, who respectively signify either end of the spectrum of dichotomous femininity.

In order to present such a definitively negative portrayal of Helen, Virgil must resolve some of the liminality that defines Homeric versions of Helen, which position her as caught between mortal and goddess, Trojan and Greek. In Aeneas's speech, then, Virgil allows his hero to comment on these variable definitions of Helen and situate her in one category or the other. Relating to her mortal status, Aeneas comments that Helen "had gone/ to Earth, a hated thing, before the altars," implying that she has descended onto earth as a mere mortal and now must pray before the gods rather than be elevated as a type of goddess herself. Regarding her national ties, Aeneas highlights Helen's precarious situation in noting that she was equally "terrified of the Trojans' hate /For the city overthrown, and terrified too /Of Danaan vengeance" since she has proved problematic "Both to her own homeland and Troy." While these observations may initially seem to perpetuate the Homeric portrayal of Helen as caught between both nations yet definable as neither, Aeneas' mention of Greece as Helen's "homeland" as opposed to Troy as simply "the city" aligns Helen much more closely with the former. Further, the reference to Menelaus as Helen's "abandoned husband" underscores her ties in male ownership to her country of origin, as does the early use of her patronymic. By situating Helen clearly in these spaces, Aeneas continues his vitriolic attack; Helen must be defined in order to be vilified.

In *Aeneid* VI, the mutilated shade of Deiphobus similarly emphasizes Helen's capacity for duplicity in another retelling of the sack of Troy:

the Laconian woman's ghastly doing
Sank me in this hell. These are the marks
She left me as her memorial. You know
How between one false gladness and another
We spent that last night—no need to remind you.
When the tall deadly horse came at one bound,
With troops crammed in its paunch, above our towers,
She made a show of choral dance and led
Our Phrygian women crying out on Bacchus
Here and there—but held a torch amid them,
Signaling to Danaans from the Height.
(*Aen.* VI.510-520)

Like Aeneas, Deiphobus avoids calling Helen by her name, instead referring to her as “the Laconian woman.” He highlights her capacity for deception first by terming their relationship, here presumably sexual, as “false gladness,” and then through another retelling of the Trojan horse episode that Menelaus and Helen debated in the *Odyssey*. Deiphobus’ version of this event aligns with Helen’s version in Homeric epic, as it clearly aligns her with the Greeks. Further, he positions her as the subject of many active verbs: Helen is “signaling” and Deiphobus directly attributes his suffering to “the Laconian woman’s ghastly doing.” Meredith Prince similarly points out that “Deiphobus’s Helen is deceptive, yet more active than Aeneas’s Helen. The fearing and lurking Helen is now pretending, holding a torch, and leading a ritual. The silent Helen now calls the Greeks and, instead of fearing them, she helps” (Prince 202). Although deceptive and dual in her pretending, however, this Helen is still decisively defined as evil. Deiphobus’ undisputed perspective on the Trojan horse episode, especially when contrasted with the ambiguous nature of this scene in *Odyssey* IV, underscores Virgil’s attempted resolution of Helen’s liminality.

While Virgil contains Helen, reducing the ambiguity that defines her Homeric appearances, he still splits women into the two poles of pure and corrupt through his portrayals of Dido and Lavinia, each of whom he links to Helen. In Mihoko Suzuki’s words, “Virgil divides

the doubleness of Helen in the *Odyssey* and assigns Dido and Lavinia to each pole of the binary opposition” (Suzuki 92). Dido, then, serves as a surrogate Helen in the first half of the epic, where she represents Helen’s unchaste and impure side, highlighting the dangers that women present to men on such quests as Aeneas’. Virgil creates a variety of connections between Helen and Dido to underscore this link. Aeneas gives Dido the gift of “the mantle and veil that Helen brought with her when she eloped to Troy with Paris” (99). Further, Dido’s primary suitor, Iarbas, “refers to Aeneas as another Paris, thereby implying that Dido is the second Helen” (103). While both examples call attention to the relationship between the two women, Suzuki also points out a subtler and more substantial comparison. As Helen’s perception depends upon the unresolved question of her culpability in her affair with Paris—did she willfully elope or was she helplessly kidnapped?—so, too, does Dido’s narrative center on “the question of [her] culpability and innocence in her passion for Aeneas and her subsequent suicide” (94). In Helen’s appearance in Book II of the *Aeneid*, Virgil answered this question and tended towards perceiving Helen as responsible for her own actions, and thus the casualties of the Trojan War. Similarly, Virgil represents Dido as responsible for her actions, endowing her with agency.

The *Aeneid* constantly grapples with questions of fate and free will. Paradoxically, Aeneas both ascribes personal responsibility to others, such as Helen, and is renowned for his piety, as Virgil highlights with the repeated epithet *pious*, implying that Aeneas should submit to fate and recognize the absence of free will in a society that subscribes to the doctrine of an overarching *fatum*. Aeneas’ association with fate creates a crippling double standard. When Aeneas leaves Carthage and abandons Dido, prompting her suicide, he can attribute this action to the path that the gods have ordained, saying that he “took the course heaven gave him” (*Aen.*IV.397). Dido, however, transcends the bounds of fate in taking her own life, as Virgil

states that “she died, not at her fated span /Nor as she merited, but before her time/ Enflamed and driven mad” (IV.700-702). In her ability to exercise free will here, Dido simultaneously gains agency and infamy, as a woman with agency pushes against the social constructions of the *Aeneid*, which in labeling its titular hero as pious, values both faith and masculinity highly. The double standard of the *Aeneid* allows men to be both active and pious, but women are forced to be only one or the other. Thus, in transgressing social bounds through exercising her agency, Dido also pushes against the bounds of an acceptable femininity; she comes to represent the treacherous, unchaste side of Helen, the wanton Helen who purposefully eloped with Paris.

Lavinia, on the other hand, stands as a paragon of female purity in her passivity, silence, and lack of agency. Further, Virgil situates Lavinia as another double of Helen, a foil to Dido. When she appears in Book VII, Juno compares Aeneas to Paris, rendering Lavinia a second Helen by extension:

Hecuba's not the only one who carried
A burning brand within her and bore a son
Whose marriage fired a city. So it is
With Venus' child, a Paris once again,
A funeral torch again for Troy reborn!
(*Aen.* VII.322-6)

Here, Juno alludes to a prophecy from before the beginning of the *Iliad*, namely, Cassandra's prophecy before her brother's birth that he would bring destruction to Ilium. These images of fire also evoke the language Virgil uses earlier in the text to describe the love between Dido and Aeneas as a burning flame, and highlights the dangers of such passion. Lavinia's mother, Amata, makes a similar comparison shortly after, asking her husband Latinus not to give Lavinia away in marriage to Aeneas: “Was that not the way /The Phrygian shepherd entered Lacedaemon /And carried Helen off to Troy's far city?” (VII.362-4). Even without these direct analogies, however, Virgil presents a clear parallel between the Italian war and the preceding Trojan one: both are

fought over a woman, over a marriage made with a foreigner, and follow destructive prophecies regarding one of the partners in that marriage.

Since Virgil favors the side of the Trojans in each war, however, he has replaced the controversial Helen figure with a distilled version of her former self, a Lavinia who is anything but complex. Suzuki highlights the differences between the two surrogate Helens of Virgil's work: Dido is present, has much to say, makes her own destiny and rules her own city. Conversely, Lavinia is only seen twice, has no spoken lines, and takes no real action – she is simply given to Aeneas by her father (Suzuki 127). Essentially, Dido is a subject where Lavinia is an object. Virgil's decision to purify the stand-in Helen of his own war story serves to reinforce these passive qualities as emblematic of the ideal womanhood. As Suzuki says, "Lavinia is not an agent of her own fate, but an embodiment of beauty to be contemplated from a distance, fought over, and won" (128). Setting Lavinia opposite Dido, her passionate foil, serves to emphasize Lavinia's silence and passive acceptance of her fate, whereas Dido ignores fate and charts her own course. These two women epitomize the conflict within the figure of Helen, whom Virgil attempts to rationalize and condemn by eliminating her inherent ambiguities.

Instead of removing Helen's liminality altogether, however, Virgil simply divides and transcribes it onto two other women, each of whom is so closely linked to Helen that their disparate portrayals can only be seen as ratifying the undecidability at the crux of Helen's character. While Virgil attacks Helen's physical body through Aeneas' diatribe at the altar of Vesta, reducing her to her most villainous self, her duality remains present throughout the work in the opposing figures of Dido and Lavinia, one burning in her passion and the other barely blushing. Thus, Virgil fails to entirely banish the precarious ambiguity of Helen from his work. Still, his vilification of Helen and separation of her two poles serves as a sort of bridge between

the Greek tradition of purifying Homer's nuanced Helen and the Early Modern pattern that tends towards similar demonization but a notably different treatment of female agency.

Ovid's depiction of Helen also serves as a source for Early Modern texts, although he is more interested in humorous satire than in the moral commentary practiced by his contemporaries. His *Heroides*, specifically the letters from Paris to Helen and vice versa, present an interesting perspective on Helen and her ever-debated levels of agency. In their article "*Communis Erinys: The Image of Helen in the Latin Poets*," Lee Fratantuono and Johanna Braff point out that "Ovid describes the beginning of the relationship between Helen and Paris, a starting point that allows the poet rather new territory for investigation: most previous depictions of Helen focus on the period of the Trojan War or the aftermath" (Fratantuono and Braff 50). This alternate timeline that Ovid investigates uniquely allows him an inroad to the roots of Helen's problematic agency. Further, as the *Aeneid* positions Aeneas and Dido on different sides of the debate regarding fate and free will, so too does Ovid's *Heroides* situate Paris and Helen opposite each other.

In writing to Helen, Paris frequently reminds her of the intervention of the gods, constructing a world lacking in mortal free will and in which agency itself is problematized. He tells Helen that "Venus has set this course and marked it plain" (*Her.* XVI.15), and "Make no mistake, this plan is none of mine; /My enterprise is backed by power divine" (17-18). In blaming higher powers, Paris distances himself from culpability. Ovid's satirical style, however, undermines Paris' perceived connection to the gods, as Paris repeatedly misinterprets prophecies, failing to understand his fate. For instance, he knows of his mother Hecuba's dream that she would give birth to a burning torch, but believes the torch represents his passionate love, saying "They all said Troy would burn with Paris' flame; /The fire my heart feels now is just the same"

(45-50). Paris applies the same metaphorical understanding of the fire to Cassandra's prophecy that his return to Troy will yield flames and destruction. He tells Helen that "She spoke the truth: that raging fire I find /Consumes my heart and devastates my mind" (125-6). Actually, this prophecy refers to the literal burning of Troy, not Paris' fiery desire for Helen. Since Paris' insistence on fate aligns him with Virgil's Aeneas and his legendary piety, Ovid manages to simultaneously undermine both of these individuals when he questions the possibility of mortals understanding fate by making Paris' misinterpretations into a punchline.

In undermining Paris' fate-based deferral of responsibility, Ovid favors individual free will, allowing Helen to stand for this active position in her letter to Paris. First, due to their epistolary form, the paired letters give Helen a unique degree of agency in allowing her a direct voice, through which she speaks lengthily and with interiority. Helen talks about shame and blame in her previous abduction by Theseus, saying that "If I'd consented, I'd have been to blame," providing some insight into her logic concerning her later affair with Paris (*Her.*XVII.23). She dismisses Paris' comparison between her and her mother for a similar reason, highlighting how Leda was tricked into adultery, and did not knowingly consent to it:

She was tricked and duped, as all agree;
A swan disguise caused her adultery
But I can see the snare and if I fall
No plea of ignorance will help at all
(*Her.*XVII.45-48)

Essentially, Helen says here that her situation differs from her mother's because she would know exactly what she was doing if she did run away with Paris. Although Ovid concludes these letters before Helen and Paris leave Greece together, meaning that he does not explicitly confirm their elopement, the Helen of the *Heroides* certainly considers herself a woman with agency. Moreover, Ovid's Helen recognizes the consequences of exercising agency:

What's wrong to urge is wrong to force, I know;
But such force would make me willing, even so.
Such violence can please the victim too—
I'd be quite happy, if compelled by you.
(*Her.* XVII.185-8)

This plea shows Helen's awareness of the scenario she requires in order to be found faultless—a forceful kidnapping, violence that she could not resist. Fratantuono and Braff emphasize these lines in particular as “extraordinary: Ovid's Helen openly wishes that Paris had physically violated her. Again, the implication is that such a rape would have removed responsibility from Helen for the act that in reality she desired; she is no Lucretia, ready to commit suicide rather than live with the aftermath of her own violation” (Fratantuono and Braff 52). In Helen's acknowledgement of this desire, Ovid creates a uniquely complex Helen who knows it would be wrong to run away with Paris and yet recognizes her temptation, who logically combats many of his arguments and yet admits that in the face of force, lacking culpability, she would enjoy giving in to him. This Helen, one given a voice to speak for herself, is especially perverse.

Fratantuono and Braff also argue that even as Ovid's Helen wishes to escape responsibility, she exercises agency in her rhetoric. They consider Helen blameworthy because of the ruses that she employs from Ovid's own *Ars Amatoria*: “while Paris certainly follows the Ovidian suggestion that one should test amatory chances by an exploratory letter, Helen too follows the poet's advice that the pursued girl should give her would-be lover cause for both fear and hope. The girl will be all the more alluring by her non-committal stance” (51). Although Helen claims passivity and Ovid concludes these two epistles before either Helen or Paris takes any physical action, Helen's use of these rhetorical strategies shows a very different intent. Fratantuono and Braff contend that Helen's future yielding to Paris is nearly inevitable by the end of her response, “but artfully, and with full exercise of the lessons of the elegiac tradition,

she does not yield in the lines of her amatory epistle” (53). As such, while Ovid’s Helen strategically maintains innocence within the lines of her letter, her real intentions lurk underneath, suggesting responsibility commensurate with that of Virgil’s demonized Helen.

Virgil and Ovid set the stage for the translation of Helen’s story in medieval literature, particularly in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. Although the two authors both endow Helen with agency, their respective portrayals of the woman at the center of the war otherwise largely diverge, and yet both perspectives come into play in medieval representations of Helen. In their article “The Faire Queene Eleyne in Chaucer’s *Troilus*,” Christopher C. Baswell and Paul Beekman Taylor address medieval mythography and iconography relating to Helen in order to contextualize her presence in Chaucer’s work. Baswell and Taylor argue that the mythographical and iconographical traditions relating to Helen emphasize, in turn, “the Virgilian destructiveness of Helen on the one hand and her Ovidian beauty and (sometimes cynical) wit on the other” (Baswell and Taylor 295). They observe that “the Helen of the mythographers is almost entirely a figure of treachery and disaster. Her near-divine beauty is universally acknowledged, but the lust it arouses and the historical chaos it produces are emphasized above all” (295). This type of narrative aligns closely with the version of Helen present in Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

Baswell and Taylor point out that medieval iconography, on the other hand, tended to reflect Ovid’s nuanced portrayal of Helen more so than Virgil’s. While she often appears in illustrations depicting her initial meeting with Paris, her elopement, and her time at Troy before its fall, she retains “her virtually unbroken and placid calm, her fixed smile, and the almost universal approbation with which she seems to be received by all Trojans” (Baswell and Taylor 297). These images rarely focus on Helen’s capacity for sorrow or regret; some early

manuscripts have illuminations of the sort, but iconographers seemed to be more interested in Helen as an active eloping agent and show her happily arriving in Troy (298). As such, the iconography does not ignore the carnage at Troy, but “while Helen is known to have been a cause of this, she is most often not visually implicated in it” (300). In the same way that Ovid allows Helen to consider eloping with Paris and speak for herself, medieval iconography also represents Helen as an agent but similarly keeps a distance from the actual consequences of her agency. Baswell and Taylor go on to argue that Helen’s role in *Troilus and Criseyde* most closely resembles her representation in the iconography – although culpable, Helen is somewhat suspended above it all and kept separate from consequences. Her role is “like that of a chemical catalyst, which helps produce certain reactions but is itself left untouched by them” (301). Although Chaucer embraces this Ovidian perspective in creating his Helen, he does not forget the more destructive Virgilian depiction in crafting Helen’s literary double, Criseyde.

In her book *The Reputation of Criseyde*, Gretchen Mieszkowski charts the story of Criseyde from its conception in order to argue that Chaucer was aware of Criseyde’s reputation as the archetypal unfaithful woman and used this idea in designing her character. Criseyde first appears in Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s Old French poem *Le Roman de Troie*, from about 1155, under the name “Briseida.” This alternate name becomes “Criseyde” in Chaucer and later “Cressida” in Shakespeare, but also harkens back to Briseis of the opening scenes of the *Iliad*, the enslaved concubine whom Agamemnon takes from Achilles, prompting their feud. As Mieszkowski points out, Benoît’s narrative centers around the fickleness of women, and his Briseida was “a figure whose significance was spelled out explicitly, both in the narrative itself and in the author’s commentary on it. From her first appearance in literature, Briseida was fully developed as an antifeminist lesson in woman’s inconsistency” (Mieszkowski 87). Guido de

Columnis translated Benoît's Old French romance into Latin prose in the *Historia destructionis Troiae* in the early thirteenth century, and even further emphasized Briseida's status as a fickle, evil woman (90). The Latin was also more accessible and widely read than Benoît's Old French. Additionally, Mieszkowski argues that Guido upped the "antifeminist moralizing" aspect of the story, making the Briseida of his popular translation "more fickle, more lustful, more deceitful, more promiscuous, and more quickly changeable than even Benoît's Briseida" (93). These two sources, as well as Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, informed Chaucer's work.

Boccaccio's *Filostrato* (1336), Chaucer's principal source for *Troilus and Criseyde*, changed the focus of the story from Criseida's unfaithfulness to Troilus' ("Troilo's") experience of betrayal, but he did not change Criseida's significance. Mieszkowski comments that "although he reduced her to secondary importance and reshaped her story, he left her, just as she always had been, a warning sign for men against loving a fickle woman" (Mieszkowski 93). Boccaccio's poem, although it still moralizes about the unfaithfulness of women and the dangers of loving and trusting them, also shows love in terms of a duality of sorts: "love causes man's greatest pain, but it is also the source of his greatest joy" (94). These three major versions of the Criseyde story—Benoît's, Guido's, and Boccaccio's—were all available when Chaucer wrote *Troilus and Criseyde* around 1386, and all three displayed the same moralizing attitude towards Criseyde as a symbol of unfaithfulness, which informed Chaucer's own generally unfavorable treatment of her.

Criseyde's negative reputation, however, stems not only from her own literary legacy, but also from that of Helen of Troy, whose parallels to Criseyde position the latter as an archetypal unfaithful woman with Helen's culpability but none of her saving ambiguity. Baswell and Taylor sum up the relationship between the two:

Helen is not simply a source or model for Criseyde. Through literal association in the plot, through overt comparisons, and through subtler

parallels with moments in Helen's own history, Criseyde is endowed with aspects of the Trojan queen's beauty, but also burdened with implications of her infidelity and historical disastrousness. (Baswell and Taylor 302)

The surface parallels between the two abound, as *Troilus and Criseyde* serves in some ways as a reflection of the Trojan war in miniature, casting Criseyde as a second Helen, another woman caught between Greek and Trojan lovers. Baswell and Taylor also point out further points of comparison, as they highlight Criseyde's linkage to Helen through three public appearances: the feast of the Palladion where she sees Troilus for the first time, the dinner at Deiphebus' house where she speaks to Troilus for the first time, and her departure from Troy for the Greek camp (303). Their first encounter at the temple of Athena echoes the "first and fateful meeting of Paris and Helen in the temple of Venus" (303). Troilus, like Paris, is ignited by "the fyr of love," linking him to Ovid's laughable Paris of the *Heroides* and his misinterpretations of the fire prophecy, as well analogously framing Criseyde as the Helen to Troilus' Paris (Chaucer I.436). In the scene at Deiphebus' house, Chaucer establishes Helen—"Eleyne" in his text—as "an example, or mirror, for Criseyde—a model of detachment from the war, which Criseyde can never succeed in emulating" (Baswell and Taylor 305). Criseyde's removal from Troy and subsequent involvement with Diomedes obviously mirrors Helen's departure from Greece with Paris, and both face similar questions regarding their respective agency and culpability.

Helen's own portrayal in *Troilus and Criseyde* further endangers Criseyde's reputation because of the link between the two women. Baswell and Taylor argue that in characterizing his Eleyne, Chaucer plays with her royal title of "queen," introducing language that Shakespeare later echoes in *Troilus and Cressida*. The narrator and other characters in Chaucer often insist on calling Helen "queen," which is "virtually a homophone with the Middle English word *quene*," meaning "whore" (Baswell and Taylor 306). This repeated pun, characteristic of Chaucer's style,

illuminates a dichotomy between Helen as queen and Helen as prostitute, touching on the economic language and discussions of Helen's worth that permeate Shakespeare's later play. Further, even outside the homophonic consequences of the word "queen," Baswell and Taylor find the use of Helen's title significant, as "the term of respect used for Eleyne surely recalls her alien status, her flight from a hostile nation, and perhaps also her moral depravity" (306). Of course, Helen is not queen of Troy, but queen of Sparta as wife to Menelaus, and thus every iteration of this title recalls her Greek roots and marriage. The frequency with which Chaucer's narrator and characters use "queen" in describing Eleyne, then, undercuts her perceived impunity and ethereal separation from reality, constantly reminding the reader of her precarious position as a Greek queen in Troy. Baswell and Taylor point out that this portrayal of Helen complicates Criseyde's reputation by association:

This, then, is the lady—beautiful, charming, perhaps discreetly unfaithful, and ultimately treacherous—who undertakes to be Criseyde's sponsor, holds her hand, and intercedes with her for Troilus. A more delightful and morally more objectionable patroness could scarcely be imagined.
(Baswell and Taylor 308)

While Criseyde reflects the negative aspects of Chaucer's Helen, she fails to achieve the distance from responsibility that positions Helen above the fray and enables her to intervene in the narrative as advisor rather than participant.

In constructing his Criseyde, Chaucer combines aspects of various versions of Helen that precede his own. Like the Helen of the *Iliad*, Criseyde exhibits much concern about her reputation, and speaks to that effect towards the end of the text. As Mary Jo Arn notes, like Ovid's Helen, Criseyde is "reluctant to act decisively" and recognizes the consequences of her own agency – she "cannot or will not act on her own behalf," embracing passivity in an attempt to preserve her honor (Arn 5). But unlike these versions of her literary predecessor, Criseyde

lacks the “radical undecidability” that rendered previous Helens outside the scope of responsibility (Suzuki 18). So, in creating Criseyde as a second Helen, Chaucer both rejects and engages with the doubling tradition present in the work of ancient Greek writers and in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. He preserves his Eleyne’s own ambiguity and distances her from culpability, while at the same time funneling her most problematic traits into Criseyde, whose poor reputation presages the fully demonized Helen prevalent in Early Modern literature. Essentially, “Criseyde’s public sin may be her likeness to Helen, but her personal tragedy lies in her inability to be enough like the goddess-queen” (Baswell and Taylor 311). As Shakespeare and his contemporaries reimagine Helen in the Early Modern period, they shift her ambiguity from the question of her culpability to the question of her value. In doing so, they resolve much of the undecidability that separates her from Criseyde in Chaucer’s poem in order to define her clearly enough to evaluate her worth. As these women merge into two sides of the same demonic coin, Shakespeare erases Helen’s complexities, reducing her to an object of exchange among men. Thus, he returns both Helen and Cressida to the status of the latter’s literary ancestress, the *Iliad*’s Briseis: human chattel, symbols in a masculine economy that demands the reduction of women to either active demon or passive innocent.

Chapter Three: Early Modern Helen

“If we have lost so many tenths of ours
To guard a thing not ours, nor worth to us
(Had it our name) the value of one ten,
What merit’s in that reason which denies
The yielding of her up?”
— *Troilus and Cressida* II.ii.21-25

In exploring Early Modern images of Helen of Troy, I will be looking at William Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* (1602) as well as Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (1592). Although Marlowe’s play precedes Shakespeare’s chronologically and certainly influenced the latter text, I will begin by examining *Troilus and Cressida* because it follows most logically in our exploration of texts that retell the Trojan narrative. Shakespeare’s text reimagines the story that Chaucer tells in his *Troilus and Criseyde*, and additionally portrays a detailed and multifaceted economy of masculinity operated by the play’s men and concerned with the commodification of its women. After establishing the implications of Shakespeare’s sexual economy, I will analyze *Doctor Faustus* as Shakespeare’s source and examine the ways in which Marlowe’s text complicates our understanding of women’s roles in *Troilus and Cressida*.

In addition to Shakespeare’s use of Chaucer as a primary source for his play, he also drew from Homer’s *Iliad*. In his appendix to *Troilus and Cressida*, editor Anthony B. Dawson notes that while Shakespeare was likely familiar with the “whole of *The Iliad* in one or more of the Latin or French translations available in the sixteenth century,” he seems to have been drawing mainly from the seven books translated into English by George Chapman in 1598 – these were books I, II, and VII-XI (Dawson 270). Dawson argues that although “most of the events of the first four acts of the play correspond with material in those seven books,”

Shakespeare's play displays his additional knowledge of the *Iliad*'s entire arc as the play alludes to events outside the scope of Chapman's translation (270). Since the majority of Helen's Iliadic appearances take place in books III, VI, and XXIV, none of which were included in the first sections that Chapman translated, Shakespeare's portrayal of Helen must have drawn mainly from his knowledge of other translations of the *Iliad* as well as from Chaucer and Marlowe.²

Shakespeare's play builds on the connection between Helen and Cressida that Chaucer sets up in his earlier text and renders both of these women subject to the play's economically-based discourse between men, through which the men construct their masculinity. This discourse relies not only on metaphors concerned with trading and women as objects of economic exchange, but also on the establishment of the masculine values that the women symbolize. Thus, their exchange between men allows for the transaction of these values, and likewise of masculinity. In the performative economy of masculinity of this text, men commodify women according to three general conceits: woman as object, woman as body, and woman as theme. Early in the play, Troilus introduces the first of the mercantile analogies that the men frequently use to define the two women. He attempts to describe the interplay between himself, Pandarus, and Cressida by comparing his beloved to a pearl that Pandarus, as a ship, will collect and return to Troilus himself, the merchant in this scenario:

Tell me Apollo, for thy Daphne's love,
What Cressid is, what Pandar, and what we:
Her bed is India, there she lies, a pearl;
Between our Ilium and where she resides
Let it be called the wild and wand'ring flood,
Ourself the merchant and this sailing Pandar
Our doubtful hope, our convoy and our bark.
(*Troilus and Cressida*, I.i.92-98)

² Chapman eventually translated the rest of the *Iliad*, but not until after *Troilus and Cressida* (1602) was completed; "five more books were added in 1608 and the whole poem eventually appeared in 1611" (Dawson 271).

In this extended metaphor, Troilus reduces Cressida to a mere symbol, a shiny object of interest to be gained by, enjoyed by, and traded between men. He himself retains the only measure of agency in this scenario in his position as merchant, overseeing the possession and exchange of Cressida as pearl. Troilus' choice of Apollo as a guide and his reference to the Apollo and Daphne tale from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* highlights his reduction of Criseyde to a symbol. In this legend, the nymph Daphne can only escape Apollo's unwanted pursuit and maintain her chastity by turning into a laurel tree. Nevertheless, Apollo coopts the image of the laurel and makes it a symbol related to his own godliness and power; Troilus' reduction of Cressida to the image of the pearl accomplishes a similar end in foregrounding his role as the active merchant. While Daphne's metamorphosis into the symbolic laurel preserves her chastity and largely her control over her own destiny, Cressida's position as pearl does nothing of the sort, solidifying only her position as an object of exchange and her connection to the emblematic wanton woman, Helen of Troy.

Shakespeare uses the image of the pearl again in the discussion between the Trojan princes that takes place in Act II, Scene 2 of *Troilus and Cressida*. Here, Troilus describes Helen as "a pearl /Whose price hath launched above a thousand ships /And turned crowned kings to merchants," a metaphor strikingly similar to the one he uses to characterize Cressida earlier in the play (II.ii.81-3). By describing both women in the same terms, Troilus not only highlights their parallel positions, but also shows his inability to recognize women as anything other than objects, and indistinguishable objects at that. Mihoko Suzuki, in her book *Metamorphoses of Helen*, agrees with this reading, noting in her discussion of the language of merchants and exchange that Troilus' repetition of the "woman as pearl" conceit "implies that the two women are for him interchangeable" (Suzuki 224). In the metaphor at hand, Troilus reduces Helen to "a

commodity, a piece of merchandise” whose value is prescribed by the male “merchants” in the form of the Trojan princes at court (224). In addition to the woman-as-pearl conceit, which reduces the women to an object with a trade value assigned by men, Shakespeare’s men also value both Helen and Cressida according to other frameworks.

While Shakespeare reduces Helen and Cressida to commodities through the repeated woman as pearl metaphor, their values are also determined in other ways. In the exchange that leads to Cressida’s departure for the Greek camp, the Trojans find her equivalent in worth to another person, Antenor, whom Calchas entreats the Greeks to return to Troy, saying that “he shall buy my daughter” (III.iii.26-9). Similarly, when Pandarus relays the news to Cressida that she has been traded to the Greeks, he says “thou art changed for Antenor” (IV.ii.88). This economic language highlights Cressida’s position as a commodity to be bought and sold, so to speak, among men for whatever value they ascribe to her. Likewise, Hector conceives of Helen as an object owed to Menelaus according to the natural laws of humanity:

Nature craves
all dues to be rendered to their owners: now
What nearer debt in all humanity
Than wife is to the husband?
(*Troilus and Cressida* II.ii.173-6).

Hector conflates “nature” and economic laws in this assertion in a way that attempts to naturalize the objectification of women and their valuation by men, using economic language to describe Helen’s socially prescribed position.

In some instances, however, male valuations of Helen take on the form of abstractions, as when Troilus describes Helen as a “theme of honour and renown,” and therefore worth keeping at Troy (II.ii.199). In this Trojan council scene, Suzuki asserts that “the male warriors confer value upon Helen as either an object with a price or an abstract ‘theme’ that serves to reflect and

confirm male honor and glory” (Suzuki 224-5). Thus, Shakespeare represents Helen as simultaneously a “pearl” to be possessed by male “merchants,” the “debt” owed to Menelaus according to natural laws, and a “theme” through which the men construct their masculine identities. Troilus invokes typical heroic values of “fame” (II.ii.202) and “promised glory” (II.ii.204) in bolstering his claim that Helen does, in fact, symbolize “honor and renown” and that defending her will bring these values to Trojan warriors. In this situation, Helen’s worth lies in the social capital that she can provide to the men, and thus the “fame” and “promised glory” to which Troilus refers are currencies of the male economy in which Helen is valued and traded.

The key aspect of this economy of masculinity is that men are the only actors and women are reduced to objects, one of many currencies both actual and symbolic. In an oft-quoted utterance from the same Trojan council scene, Troilus introduces a philosophical element to the conversation in questioning “What’s aught but as ‘tis valued?” (II.ii.52). This question draws attention to the idea that the worth of any given thing stems from the value that society ascribes to it, a theme that echoes throughout the play in the repeated evaluations of Helen’s worth as well as her position as a symbol. Helen’s meaning as a whole is what we decide it to be, or rather what various men in the Trojan and Greek camps decide it to be. This idea first surfaces earlier in the play, in Troilus’ own somewhat contradictory complaint against keeping Helen, in which he laments that “Helen must needs be fair /When with your blood you daily paint her thus” (I.i.84-5). The “your” of this claim refers to warriors on both sides, who ascribe value to Helen through the very act of fighting for her. While Troilus’ later question “What’s aught but as ‘tis valued?” lacks an explicit agent, it implies the same actors partaking in the action of valuing: men. In an environment where men define Helen’s price as an object, her social position as a

wife, and her meaning as a symbol, Helen herself is left with no agency at all; women have no power in this male economy that revolves around constructing and confirming masculinity.

In her classic feminist essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex” (1975), Gayle Rubin discusses the systemic, unequal gender relations that structure our society and make sexuality and gender into a transaction of sorts, as reflected in the language of economics that permeates *Troilus and Cressida*. Her points about the currently and historically unequal relationship between men and women serve as important background in understanding the tangible form of the sociocultural mediation to which we have referred in our operational definition of agency based on Ahearn’s formula: “agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 112). Relying mainly on her readings of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Sigmund Freud, Rubin argues for the existence of a patriarchal hierarchy rooted in the anthropological idea of a kinship system that marked the beginning of man’s transition from primitive to civilized, and discusses at length the removal (or at least drastic lessening) of potential for female agency within this framework. This concept of a kinship system, explored by Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (originally published as *Les Structures élémentaires de la Parenté* in 1949), essentially makes the case that civilized society began with a gift-giving system in which the exchange of women between families forged social ties, bonding groups of humans together, but also giving men a higher position in determining the fate of their female counterparts, a condition that Rubin would argue has persisted since (Rubin 173-4). In this system, “women are given in marriage, taken in battle, exchanged for favors, sent as tribute, traded, bought, and sold” (175), “women are transacted as slaves, serfs, and prostitutes, but also simply as women” (176). Thus, Rubin argues, “the exchange of women is a profound perception of a system in which women do not have full rights to themselves” (177). As such,

women become the passive objects of such exchange and determination while men retain agency, acting on their own behalf and that of women. This system serves as the sociocultural context for *Troilus and Cressida*, and raises questions about Helen's ability to act at all within such a framework.

Still considering Lévi-Strauss, Rubin also argues that the division of labor between the sexes does not grow out of biological necessity, but rather “exacerbates the biological difference between sexes and thereby *creates* gender” (Rubin 178). In order for the kinship system we have discussed to work properly, allowing men to take control of female destiny, “male” and “female” must be defined as oppositional concepts that can only be whole in combination – in other words, one has agency, the other does not. Extending this idea, Rubin asserts that “at the most general level, the social organization of sex rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality” (179). This “obligatory heterosexuality” comes from the idea of the combination of two opposite halves into one whole, and the “constraint of female sexuality” stems from an extension of man's active role into the sexual realm which would then allow women to take on only that opposite role of sexual passivity. Likewise, in Rubin's articulation of the kinship system, “the preferred female sexuality would be one which responded to the desire of others rather than one which actively desired and sought a response” (182). These ideas about oppositional gender that undergird Lévi-Strauss' kinship system play a role in the creation of gendered stereotypes regarding agency that seep into literary works such as Shakespeare's.

While the application of twentieth century anthropological and feminist theory to the gendered social hierarchy in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* may seem anachronistic, we can confirm its relevance through a brief investigation of gender dynamics in the Early Modern

period. Applying Rubin and Lévi-Strauss to Shakespeare brings his work into conversation with the ideas of feminist theory, but also reflects the climate at Shakespeare's time; by situating his work in context, we can better understand the "socioculturally mediated" aspect of the agency that Shakespeare selectively allows his characters. The gendered social structure of early modern England reflects the theories that Rubin explores in its subordinate positioning of women as objects of economic exchange. In her essay "Libidinal Economies: Machiavelli and Fortune's Rape," Juliana Schiesari analyzes a 1509 letter from Machiavelli to a male friend that illustrates the positioning of women in the late feudal period, which sets up the sexual economy of the subsequent early modern period in the next century. In this letter, Machiavelli describes his encounter with a prostitute in Verona, resulting in the final revelation that she turned out to be unattractive. Machiavelli then condemns the feminized figure of fortune, or *fortuna*, in lamenting his terrible luck with women. The female prostitute and the female manifestation of fortune both serve as interesting points from which to discuss this letter from a feminist point of view. First, as Schiesari points out, in the fortune figure, "the capriciousness of good fortune is misogynistically metamorphized as the capriciousness of women" (Schiesari 172). Additionally, "what the overdetermined figure of *fortuna* screens is the existence of class and gender hierarches," making it appear that "misfortune is the result not of nascent capitalism or masculine privilege but of one's 'lot'" (173). Thus, the feminine serves as a sort of scapegoat for the problematic results of a male-driven economy.

Second, the female prostitute presents a challenge to the male domination of the sexual economy, as the woman in some ways can take an active position in buying and selling, even if she, or at least her body, is simultaneously the object of the transaction. Machiavelli's attack on the prostitute, then, confirms his insecurity with women's infringement on the male sphere,

transgressing the boundaries of a gender binary constructed in terms of opposition. Such a reaction supports Rubin's argument that Lévi-Strauss' kinship system necessitates the cultural expansion of biological difference. She states that "gender is a socially opposed division of the sexes. It is a product of the social relations of sexuality. Kinship systems rest upon marriage. They therefore transform males and females into 'men' and 'women,' each an incomplete half which can only find wholeness when united with the other" (Rubin 179). For these two halves to need each other, to become the culturally-defined "men" and "women" as amplified versions of their biological sexes, they must not be able to fulfill their needs on their own, and must not receive from their opposite-gendered counterpart any qualities that they already have. Thus, Rubin argues, "far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities. It requires repression" – for men of culturally "feminine" traits, for women of culturally "masculine" traits (180). As such, Machiavelli's violent condemnation of the prostitute serves as a reaction to a female appropriating typically male cultural features, here economic and even sexual agency. In her reading of Machiavelli's letter, Schiesari agrees with this position, noting that "the economic scandal of prostitution is that the woman/commodity can sell herself" (Schiesari 177). Thus, prostitution amounts to one of the few ways in which woman can gain agency in the male economy, but also necessitates that they buy into its terms in order to be a participant in such transactions.

Machiavelli's attack on the prostitute serves as an especially relevant example of the constraints on women in a male-driven societal economy, as various characters compare Helen to a prostitute in her perceived wanton ways. Shakespeare echoes Chaucer's repeated pun on the words "queen" and Middle English "quene," meaning prostitute or "whore" (Baswell and Taylor 306). In Act III, Scene 1 of *Troilus and Cressida*, Pandarus builds on this joke in singing a

suggestive ditty about the “fair queen” (Shakespeare III.i.39). Pandarus’ repetition of “sweet queen, sweet queen, that’s a sweet queen” similarly emphasizes both Helen’s rightful position as queen of Sparta as wife to Menelaus (and *not* queen in Troy) and her sexual promiscuity in its pun regarding prostitution that Shakespeare lifts from Chaucer (III.i.69). Pandarus’ song also connects Helen’s sexuality to her culpability in the carnage of the Trojan War:

Love, love, nothing but love, still love, still more!
For O love’s bow
Shoots buck and doe.
The shaft confounds
Not that it wounds
But tickles still the sore.
These lovers cry, O, O, they die,
Yet that which seems the wound to kill
Doth turn ‘O, O’ to ‘ha ha he’,
So dying love lives still.
‘O, O’ a while, but ‘ha ha ha’
‘O, O’ groans out for ‘ha ha ha’ – Heigh-ho!
(*Troilus and Cressida* III.i.100-110)

The crass nature of this song, which Heather James argues in *Shakespeare’s Troy*, “features the cries of sexual love from woe, to pleasure, to regret” and parodies on orgasm and death underscores this joke about Helen’s sexuality (James 93-4). Further, it turns the pun on death and sexual climax to a more sinister tone in attributing the deaths at Troy to Helen’s presumed sexual pleasure in her relationship with Paris. The female orgasm and a woman’s ownership of her own sexuality does not fit with the prescribed model of passive femininity necessary to a clear distinction between “man” and “woman,” and so Shakespeare shows the consequences of a woman’s prioritization of her own pleasure.

Further, the largely overpowering economy of masculinity within the Early Modern period but also within Shakespeare’s text itself precludes women from taking control of their own sexuality and pleasure. The only women who *can* take control of these areas of their lives

must buy into the economy itself: prostitutes, as Machiavelli decries in his 1509 letter. At the end of the scene, Paris calls Helen his “Nell,” another term for a common whore or prostitute at the time (III.i.119). While James considers this staging merely “a scene of generic debasement,” it actually provides much more in its contextualization of the cultural and social economy of gender that pervades the play (94). In examining Machiavelli’s letter, Schiesari presents the argument that its text “stages the fear of a feminine symbolic order, one where the distinctions between political economy and sexual economy, subject of exchange and object of exchange, masculinity and femininity, are blurred” (Schiesari 178). In the same way, the repeated conceit of Helen as prostitute that prevails throughout her medieval and early modern appearances allows Helen the baseline level of economic agency as one who can act as both subject and object, taking on qualities of both masculinity and femininity. Thus, Helen’s positioning as a prostitute enables her disruption of the rigid gender binary in muddling the prevailing gendered division of agency. At the same time, the attention conferred on her sexuality serves to criticize her position as woman and as productive member of society. The limited agency that Helen receives in her connection to prostitution simultaneously enables her amplified vilification in its relation to her sexuality and her transgression outside of an idealized passive femininity.

Helen’s association with prostitution in *Troilus and Cressida* emphasizes the commodification of women postulated by Rubin’s theory. Likewise, the play’s discourse on marriage also reflects the subordination of women in Early Modern English society. In her book *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy*, Frances Dolan describes three concepts of marriage used in the early modern period. First, she addresses the Christian idea of marriage as the “creation of ‘one flesh,’ which at once powerfully expresses theological, emotional, and erotic union and upholds an impossible ideal” (Dolan 3). Second, English common law provided

a similar model in “suggesting that, through a legal fiction called *coverture*, husband and wife should become one legal agent by means of the husband’s subsumption of his wife into himself” (3). Third, Dolan mentions a comic tradition that did emphasize that husband and wife were on equal footing, but highlighted the conflict inherent in this structure of equality, as it “compels husband and wife to war for mastery within their marriage and household, mastery figured as a single pair of pants only one can wear” (3). Essentially, both the legal and religious traditions promote the idea of man and woman combining into a single unit—not, notably, a unit comprised of equal parts man and woman, but a unit involving a woman being absorbed into a man. Comedy coopts the only possibility of equality between man and wife, transforming it into a power struggle that still often finds its resolution in a return to the status quo of the man in charge.

Legal and social ideas about early modern women’s rights further restricted their capacity to act. In her examination of the common law doctrine of *coverture*, Claudia Zaher discusses the inequality in rights between married and unmarried women, highlighting the impact of perceived subsumption by a man: “Widows and unmarried adult women could own property, collect rents, manage shops, and have standing in court, but by virtue of her marriage, the married woman enjoyed none of these privileges, and her person as well as her personal and real property belonged to her husband. Under *coverture*, a wife simply had no legal existence” (Zaher 460). This idea of *coverture*, in which the woman becomes absorbed into the man in a legal sense, essentially ends the existence of the woman entirely. Acceptance of this doctrine was rooted in the early modern “way in which authority was understood to be fundamentally and ontologically male” (McBride 6). *Coverture* as a legal and social ideology serves as a somewhat hypocritical counter to the idea of two people merging into one, as this union appears not as a merger but as

an erasure. The oppositional definitions of man and woman, however, position this erasure as the only possible option in that two inherently unlike substances could not possibly combine into one functional body. As Rubin emphasizes in *The Traffic in Women* with regard to the success of the kinship system, early modern society similarly relies on opposition since “the exercise of power depended on a distinction between masculinity and femininity or, more accurately perhaps, the control of everything associated with the feminine by those who claimed the fullness of masculine privilege” (6). As such, when Helen, through her associations with prostitution, transgresses the bounds of femininity, achieving limited agency and becoming more than a token in the male economy, she becomes a villain in Shakespeare’s text. In its most negative formulation, Helen becomes a literal prostitute—at best, she serves as an icon of female capriciousness and sexuality.

The Biblical model of marriage in the Early Modern period, however, problematizes the potential for any female agency at all, especially Helen’s. Because this period preceded ideas that love necessitates equality and presumed hierarchy in marriage, men consistently held the power position as the perceived “head” of the relationship (Dolan 27). Christian ideology explains this allocation of power as a form of punishment for women in retribution for Eve’s original sin. Marital hierarchy was associated with this idea of punishment, which extended to the perception that woman must be subservient as part of the eternal price for Eve’s fall (Dolan 34). Dolan describes Eve’s agency as the cause for her fall, saying that her “capacity for independent choice and action was then crucial to her role in the fall. By casting Eve as the spouse who chooses to eat from the tree of forbidden knowledge, Genesis both assigns Eve a role as a leader rather than a follower and condemns her for playing that part” (40). If marriage promotes the synthesis of two people into one, specifically a single body in which the head is the man, then, as Dolan

suggests, the problem for a woman is her individuality: “having her own will, her own ideas and interests, constitutes a withholding of herself from the union, a withholding that renders that union nonexistent” (50). Eve’s fall and subsequent condemnation resemble Shakespeare’s treatment of Helen—but then what is Helen’s original sin?

Like Eve, Helen’s vilification in pre-Renaissance texts is predicated on the idea of her active choice and ability to take action, generally the action of eloping with Paris. Homer leaves the question of Helen’s agency in this instance unresolved, but keeps it open as a possibility. Virgil, however, certainly sees Helen as culpable in the destruction of Troy. Likewise, Baswell and Taylor preface their literary analysis of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* with a discussion of medieval iconography relating to Helen that would similarly seem to indicate a perception of Helen as active eloping agent and show her happily arriving in Troy (Baswell and Taylor 298). Shakespeare toys with the possibility of Helen’s agency in positioning her as a prostitute and condemning her for her transgression of the agency-based bounds between “male” and “female,” but he does not find her guilty of the “original sin” of willfully eloping with Paris. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Paris himself characterizes Helen’s arrival in Troy as a “rape,” admitting to abduction rather than elopement (II.ii.148). If Helen did not choose to run away with Paris, then it should follow that she cannot be held accountable for lives lost at Troy—and yet she is, as bawdily shown by Pandarus’ song.

Further, the context of the gender inequities of the Early Modern period and the sexual economy in which she exists may remove any possibility of Helen’s agency. This claim follows from our operational definition of agency as requiring the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” – the social context of Early Modern England and the stipulations of the performative economy of masculinity that Shakespeare creates in *Troilus and Cressida* contribute to an

environment that renders Helen's agency impossible (Ahearn 112). As a result, Helen's status as an icon of female over-sexuality and unfaithfulness in Shakespeare stems more from her transgression into the realm of masculine agency—which she commits only through male ascriptions of her as prostitute—than from her actions themselves, which lack of agency prohibits her from taking. The confusion of agency surrounding Shakespeare's Helen highlights a problem with the logical assumption that men assigning blame relies on their assignment of agency. Examining Marlowe's text, which similarly considers Helen's abduction a nonconsensual rape and still vilifies her, as one of Shakespeare's sources helps to clarify these authors' stances on Helen's agency and blame.

Chapter Four: Marlowe and Shakespeare

*“Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.
Her lips suck forth my soul. See, where it flies!
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.”*
— *Doctor Faustus* V.1.92-94

Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* stands as an important precursor to Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*. While Marlowe’s moralizing play does not itself retell the Trojan War narrative like Chaucer or Shakespeare, it engages with the Trojan narrative and other aspects of the classical past in ways that illuminate Shakespeare’s subsequent treatment of the same material. Notably, Helen makes a crucial appearance in the closing scenes of *Doctor Faustus* that aligns her with the demonic side of her dual tradition and harkens back to the *eidolon* tradition discussed in Norman Austin’s *Helen of Troy and her Shameless Phantom*.

Throughout *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe sets up an unambiguous moral code that lends itself to the demonization of Helen common in the Early Modern period. In the first scene of the play, the appearance of the Good Angel and the Evil Angel illustrates Marlowe’s belief in these kinds of dichotomous moral poles. Not only does Marlowe personify definite good and evil, he also consistently refutes the possibility of moral ambiguity to which Faustus gravitates. At various points, Marlowe shows Faustus entertaining the possibility of such ambiguity only to have these ideas dismissed by more informed characters, such as Mephistopheles or Lucifer himself. The absence of moral ambiguity is especially apparent in the play’s reaction to Faustus’ idea of himself as comparable to the classical poets and philosophers. Faustus says of himself that “This word ‘damnation’ terrifies not him, /For he confounds hell in Elysium. /His ghost be with the old philosophers” (I.3.58-60). In this statement, Faustus fails to distinguish between the

Christian concept of hell and the classical idea of the Elysian Fields, the resting place for blessed souls after death. The crossover between religious traditions underscores Faustus' preoccupation with the classical world, while his conflation of hell and Elysium, much more closely linked to the Christian notion of heaven, highlights his moral confusion. Further, this comment can be read with extreme dramatic irony as both the audience and most other characters in the play recognize that Faustus is not living a virtuous life at all and will most certainly be damned to hell. After all, he has sold his soul to the devil.

Enabled by the definitive moral code he creates in the play, Marlowe situates Helen firmly on one of his two poles of morality—that is, at the epicenter of evil. Marlowe's setup of such black and white morality enables him to demonize Helen in an especially complete manner, as he need not leave room for the nuance that a more flexible moral scheme might allow. Further, the shade of Helen in *Doctor Faustus* fits in with the *eidolon* tradition and Helen's doubling in classical texts, as Marlowe's Helen is not the real woman, of course, but her perfect likeness. Before Helen's appearance, Faustus makes this distinction when he raises the shade of Alexander the Great in a similar manner. When the emperor asks Faustus to conjure Alexander and his lover, Faustus replies that "it is not in my ability to /present before your eyes the true substantial bodies of those /two deceased princes" (IV.1.45-7). Instead, Faustus suggests that he can bring "such spirits as can lively resemble Alexander and /his paramour" to the court and when he does, the emperor cannot tell the difference between these "spirits" and their "true substantial bodies" (IV.1.51-2). Presumably, this same logic applies to the apparition of Helen of Troy in the following act—this image of a woman is not actually Helen in the flesh, but an indistinguishable likeness, not unlike the evil phantoms of Helen that Stesichorus and Euripides placed in Troy to clear the reputation of the real, fleshly Helen, often found in Egypt. If Faustus

does not have the ability to conjure “true substantial bodies,” then the Helen before him must be of the ghostly and thus demonic variety, and Marlowe confirms her evil in her actions.

Helen’s role in Faustus’ own damnation confirms her status as the unquestionably demonic phantom version of her classical self. While Homer leaves the issue of Helen’s culpability in catalyzing the Trojan War unresolved—he does not make a definitive claim regarding whether she was abducted by Paris or willfully eloped with him—Marlowe answers this question. The elders on the wall at Troy in Book III of the *Iliad* wonder upon seeing Helen “Who could blame either the Trojans or Greeks /For suffering so long for a woman like this?” (*Il.* III.164-5). Marlowe echoes these lines in his text when Faustus first summons Helen’s spirit before him and his fellow scholars. One of these scholars observes that “No marvel though the angry Greeks pursued /With ten years’ war the rape of such a queen, /Whose heavenly beauty passeth all compare” (V.1.27-9). This statement amends the Homeric text by adding a key detail, “the rape of such a queen,” removing Helen’s agency in the affair and thus presumably lessening her culpability. While another text might increase sympathy towards Helen in accordance with her decreased active role, however, *Doctor Faustus* leaves no room for a moral middle ground, and so Helen remains relegated to the realm of evil. Instead, Helen’s lessened agency allows Marlowe to reallocate this blame onto Faustus himself, whom he aligns with Paris—the abductor and abuser in this scenario.

Through the language that he uses to refer to Helen and the ways that Faustus constructs his position in her classical narrative, Marlowe makes a moral judgment not only on Helen and her traditional story, but also on Faustus himself. When the scholars first suggest that Faustus conjure Helen’s spirit, they repeatedly affirm her status as Greek rather than Trojan, directly calling her “Helen of Greece” (V.1.11) and “the peerless dame of Greece,” emphasizing her

status as belonging to Menelaus and her native country (V.1.14). As in Chaucer's repeated use of Helen's title "queen" in *Troilus and Criseyde*, this mention of Helen's fatherland serves as a constant reminder of her otherness while in Troy and designates Greece as her rightful place, taking sides in the Iliadic conflict. This positioning aligns Marlowe's sympathies with the Greeks, which in turn highlights Faustus' own moral failings when he likens himself to Paris. Faustus inserts himself into the Trojan narrative, saying:

I will be Paris, and for love of thee,
Instead of Troy shall Württemberg be sacked;
And I will combat with weak Menelaus
And wear thy colors on my plumèd crest.
Yea, I will wound Achilles in the heel
And then return to Helen for a kiss.

(*Doctor Faustus*, V.1.97-102)

Having established his allegiance to the Greek cause, Marlowe uses Helen as a tool to position Faustus as another Paris, who in this version of the story carries much of the blame for the Trojan War, as he played the active role in abducting Helen. In allowing Faustus to take on this role, Helen's presence gives Marlowe the framework to finalize Faustus' damnation. Notably, Faustus' continued deliberations on repenting that permeate many of the preceding scenes end once he encounters Helen, and scholars such as Michael Hattaway and W.W. Greg view their tryst as the solidifying Faustus' fate. In his article "The Theology of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*," Hattaway writes that "by letting his sensuality triumph over his reason, by giving himself to Helen rather than heeding the Old Man's counsel, [Faustus] deprives himself of heavenly grace and is unable to repent" (Hattaway 73). Similarly, in his classic essay "The Damnation of Faustus," Greg argues that "with Faustus' union with Helen the nice balance between possible salvation and imminent damnation is upset" (Greg 107). While Faustus has been attempting to straddle the realms of good and evil in his discussions of repentance up to this point, his

encounter with Helen and resulting self-alignment with Paris renders his salvation impossible in keeping with the oppositional poles that Marlowe creates in the play's moral code.

The emphasis on Helen's classical context also illustrates her commodification and her value as a token in the performative economy of masculinity present in *Doctor Faustus*, an economy between men that persists in Shakespeare's work as well. At the moment of her encounter with Faustus, Helen's attractiveness is located outside her physicality. Indeed, Helen's body itself seems almost irrelevant in *Doctor Faustus*. Like Homer, Marlowe describes her only in terms of the superlativity of her looks, omitting specific physical descriptors. The notoriously unspecific terms of Helen's beauty result in Faustus' confusion upon actually seeing her, delineated in some of the most famous lines of the text: "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships / And burned the topless towers of Ilium?" (V.1.90-91). The very nature of these lines as a question underscores the secondary importance of Helen's physical appearance—Faustus cannot immediately identify the image of the woman that inspired the Trojan War. But of course he would not recognize her; in his essay "Marlowe's Helen and the Erotics of Cultural Memory," John S. Garrison points out that "received wisdom from the ancients about the specifics of Helen's appearance is notably scant, and such a paucity of description may be tied to the power of her beauty" (Garrison 120). Although Faustus goes on to laud Helen's looks, her worth is tied more closely to the value ascribed to her beauty, here closely related to her position as a link to the classical past, than to her beauty itself. Helen's status as spirit rather than fleshly woman helps in this distinction, as the value of her physical body gives way to her value as a symbol, in this case of classical tradition and, more broadly, mastery of knowledge. As a spirit, Helen explicitly is not a "true substantial body," but rather becomes a symbol employed by Marlowe as a token in generating Faustus' masculinity.

Marlowe defines masculinity in *Doctor Faustus* in terms of intellectual rather than sexual or physical prowess, and thus attainment of superlative knowledge simultaneously maximizes the masculinity of the knower. In her ambiguous but extreme beauty, Helen becomes an unspecific superlative, a paragon whose meaning Marlowe warps to commodify her as a symbol in his own text. Helen's value as symbol, then, transmutes her superlativity in beauty into superlativity in her effectiveness as a signifier—because she is the *most* beautiful, the “best” in that regard, she serves as a highly charged token. Possessing the “best” of something indicates the possessor's own prowess. In *Doctor Faustus*, Helen's function as a superlative signifier reflects the values of the text, and she symbolizes intellectual achievement and thus peak masculinity. In examining Faustus' lack of interest in the other women Mephistopheles offers, courtesans “as chaste as was Penelope /as wise as Saba, or as beautiful /As was bright Lucifer before his fall” (II.1.152-4), Stephen Orgel sees Faustus' attraction to Helen as rooted in her ties to the classical past:

Mephistopheles has offered him the most beautiful women in the world, all he can handle, every morning. What he wants instead is a literary allusion, a paragon from his classical education, Homer's ideal. Helen *is* a spirit, the quintessential emanation of humanist passion—for the best book, the best poem, the best text. What is desirable about her is that she *isn't* a woman. (Orgel 574)

Notably, Helen's superlative feature—her beauty—matches that of Lucifer, aligning these two spirits or devils, but it is not her physicality that attracts Faustus. Likewise, Garrison argues that “the erotics of Marlowe's Helen seem closely tied to her ability to generate fantasies about engaging with the stuff of history, rather than linked to material erotics of connecting with her body” (Garrison 125). As a spirit rather than a physical woman, Helen's beauty or sexuality cannot be paramount; instead, the superlativity that she represents, her status as “the best” moves from the best woman to the best symbol.

For Faustus, Helen's superlative looks carry additional significance in relation to Homer's epic narrative. Garrison describes Helen's dual role: "this figure seemingly summoned from classical antiquity at once emblemizes a shared cultural memory of the classical world and functions as an archetype for erotic desire, given her status as a legendary possessor of supreme female beauty" (Garrison 120). Unable to recognize her physically, as shown by his question upon seeing her, Faustus centers his valuation of Helen around her status as classical relic, link to the great philosophers and poets whom he so admires and considers to be models of intellectual achievement. Garrison comments that "upon realizing that he does not know and in fact cannot know this Helen, Faustus forgets any desire for personal intimacy and instead writes himself into cultural memory as an attempt to enter the larger realm of *kleos*," in doing so shifting Helen's importance to her epic narrative rather than her physicality (Garrison 123). As such, Helen functions primarily as a token of Faustus' intellectually-based masculinity. She carries this significance not only in her connection to the classical intellects whom Faustus admires, but also in her role as Faustus' last act using the powers gained from his pact with the devil; conjuring Helen's spirit is the ultimate achievement of his dalliance with dark magic. Greg characterizes Faustus' union with Helen as "the climax of his career," in academics or in magic (Greg 105). In this play concerned with the consequences of intellectual overreaching, Faustus' attainment of this ultimate symbol of knowledge and masculinity indicates that he has gone too far. As such, the shade of Helen serves as the harbinger of his demise, a token not worth its price.

In implicating Helen and the values she stands for in Faustus' eventual damnation, Marlowe judges Helen's worth as symbol and as exchanged commodity in the economy not only of *Doctor Faustus*, but also of the *Iliad*. The leading question of the Helen scene, "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships/ And burned the topless towers of Ilium?," in addition to

relegating Helen's physical appearance only to secondary importance, also serves to devalue Helen. If she is not immediately recognizable, then her looks must not quite live up to legend. In this case, if she is not actually an exemplar of beauty, then she is not worth Faustus' damnation, the price he has to pay for the power that has enabled him to summon her. It follows, then, that if she is not worth a single soul's damnation, she is not worth the many more lives lost at Troy.

Nicholas C. Rynearson draws attention to Helen's commodification and her evaluation as a token, writing that her "excessive beauty is one reward among the powers and pleasures unbounded in scape or scope and limited only by time—the twenty-four years stipulated in the contract with Lucifer—for which Faustus forfeits his soul" (Rynearson 3). Further, however, he argues that Helen is not a sufficient reward: "in this moralizing tale even the most excessively beautiful prize is of course no fair exchange for the immortal, Christian soul" (3). Ultimate beauty or lack thereof aside, if attaining Helen, or even her shade, cannot justify the damnation of a single soul, then *Doctor Faustus* retroactively raises questions about the symbolic economy of the *Iliad* as well, framing Helen as an overvalued token in the Trojan War, where she cost far more than just one life. In terms of the *Iliad*, Rynearson sees Helen as having a "doubled role" as both object and subject: "as an object of desire, Helen embodies an ideology of superlativity that seeks to justify the loss of many lives for a single woman; at the same time, as a desiring subject, she raises sinister doubts about the ideology of that superlativity" (4). In terms of *Doctor Faustus*, Helen serves as both the superlative upper limit of beauty and the symbolic representation of having achieved the upper limit of knowledge. She remains, however, trapped in a text that itself, to echo Rynearson's description of Helen's role in the *Iliad*, "raises sinister doubts about the ideology of superlativity" and punishes excess ambition, viewing the mortal desire for such superlativity as demonic and damnable. The moral fabric of the play necessitates

skeptical examination of Helen's worth, and thus eventual recognition of her economic insufficiency.

In building the economy of masculinity in which Helen circulates, Marlowe employs the language of trade and exchange throughout his text. When Shakespeare creates a comparable economy in *Troilus in Cressida*, he borrows linguistically from Marlowe's text, highlighting the similarities in these authors' commodification of women. When Faustus first begins exploring dark magic, he imagines that he will make servile spirits "fly to India for gold, /Ransack the ocean for orient pearl" (*Faustus* I.1.82-3). Shakespeare echoes this phrasing in constructing the mercantile analogy centered around Cressida, of whom Troilus says "Her bed is India, there she lies, a pearl" (*Troilus* I.i.94). The Oxford English Dictionary notes that in Marlowe's time, the term "orient pearl" specifically referred to pearls from India, considered to be of higher quality and worth than those more common pearls from European mollusks. So not only does Shakespeare apply Marlowe's economic language of seeking the pearl to women, he specifically echoes the idea of the "orient pearl," which both values Cressida, the woman it describes, as of superlative worth and simultaneously otherizes her, separating her from the men discussing her fate so as to more easily distinguish her as object rather than agent. In Troilus' similar description of Helen as "a pearl /Whose price hath launched above a thousand ships /And turned crowned kings to merchants" (II.ii.81-3), Shakespeare obviously also borrows and amends Faustus' characterization of Helen as "the face that launched a thousand ships" (V.1.90). This particular borrowing illuminates a key evolution between these texts in the valuation of Helen.

In his revision of Marlowe's famed lines, Shakespeare simultaneously amplifies both the explicit commodification of Helen in his play and Marlowe's critical evaluation of her worth. When Faustus sees Helen and asks "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships /And

burned the topless towers of Ilium?,” he attributes agency to her “face” (*Faustus* V.1.90-91). In this instance, Helen’s face stands as a synecdoche for her physicality—her body, her appearance, even her sexuality—and Marlowe blames these features for the burning of Troy and, by extension, the deaths of the soldiers fighting over Helen in the war. While Marlowe goes on to modify Helen’s value as located in her symbolic worth as signifier of superlative intellectual achievement, her culpability in the *Iliad* remains centered around her legendary beauty. When Shakespeare rewrites Marlowe’s lines, however, he replaces “face” with “price”—Helen is “a pearl/ Whose price hath launched above a thousand ships” (III.ii.81-2). Now it is Helen’s “price” that is at fault, that value ascribed to her by the men around her as they integrate her into their system of exchange and performative allocation of masculinity. Even as he stages a drama centered around the masculine determination of female worth, Shakespeare cleverly distinguishes that it is this very male-determined price that catalyzes the conflict, moving blame away from Helen herself.

In Shakespeare’s dramatization of the debate over Helen’s worth and in Marlowe’s moralizing judgment on her insufficiency as token, both authors shift the central question regarding Helen from its focus in the classical period. Homer was most concerned with the problem of Helen’s culpability—how responsible is she for this destruction? In other words, was she abducted or did she elope willingly?³ Although the question of her worth lingers in the background of the *Iliad*, it does not take center stage. In the Early Modern period, however, Marlowe implicitly and Shakespeare more explicitly each foreground the debate over Helen’s worth, rendering the question of her culpability less relevant. The increased visibility of her use

³ Of course, the conversation about the commodification of women hovers in the background of the *Iliad*, and can be seen explicitly in the opening microcosmic conflict regarding Agamemnon, Achilles, and their concubines, Chryseis and Briseis. These women serve as an example of symbolic worth in their value as symbols of their conquerors’ masculinity and honor.

as a token of exchange between men in the performative economies of masculinity in these texts renders the quantification of her worth, rather than the establishment of her degree of responsibility, much more pressing.

As part of this shift in focus concerning Helen's characterization, Marlowe and Shakespeare each resolve the question of her culpability in the same manner: she was abducted by Paris. The scholars in *Doctor Faustus* characterize Helen's departure from Greece as "the rape of such a queen" (V.1.28). Likewise, in *Troilus and Cressida*, Paris himself makes the argument that he "would have the soil of her fair rape /Wiped off in honourable keeping her," admitting to an abduction rather than a consensual elopement (II.ii.148-9). Both texts' use of the unambiguous term "rape" makes it clear that the question of Helen's agency in coming to Troy has been resolved—she cannot be held accountable for her own rape, or at least this is what a modern audience might assume. Nevertheless, both Marlowe and Shakespeare assign responsibility to Helen for the costs of the Trojan War, despite having removed her agency in coming to Troy. Marlowe finds Helen, or at least her "face" and the physicality that it signifies, culpable for the burning of "the topless towers of Ilium" (V.1.90-91). He also uses the oppositional moral structure of *Doctor Faustus* and associations with Lucifer to situate her definitively in the realm of evil. Shakespeare portrays Helen as overtly sexual, lascivious even, as she teases Pandarus and prompts his scandalous song at the beginning of Act III. Additionally, Shakespeare condemns Cressida, Helen's unfortunate double, as the archetype of female faithlessness, which reflects on Helen as her original model as well. Even when she lacks agency, Marlowe and Shakespeare situate Helen as an exemplar of moral turpitude. But Helen is not marked as evil because of what she *does*, because she cannot *do* anything. She is evil because of what men do to and for her, because she brings out the worst in them. She makes Paris the

abductor, adulterer, and traitor that he is, and then her literary double Lavinia in Virgil's *Aeneid* makes Aeneas into a second Paris. Helen appears to Faustus, and he too becomes a Paris. In this twisted ideology of agency and femininity that permeates Helen's literary appearances, she can be both evil and entirely lacking in agency; she can be held responsible for causing violence between men without ever taking an action.

Helen's condemnation in Shakespeare and Marlowe raises a curious point. If she epitomizes evil and can be held responsible for the consequences of the Trojan War regardless of her level of agency in leaving Greece, why not complete the picture? Why not allow her to be a seductive adulteress who willingly eloped with Paris? The answer returns to the stipulations of the performative economies of masculinity present in these works. Helen's status as a token in these economies necessitates her passivity, as agency in the Early Modern period was seen as a predominantly male trait and disruptive to the ideal passive femininity. As such, the issue of Helen's culpability can only be resolved by her assuming the role of passive object rather than agent in determining her own fate (victim of rape rather than willing adulteress), and this question becomes of secondary importance to Shakespeare and Marlowe, as each of them only glosses over it briefly. These authors are less concerned with Helen's character and more concerned with what she represents symbolically and how she can serve them as a token in the masculine economies within these texts. Helen's negative portrayal no longer depends on increased agency; her sexuality and her connection to the events at Troy prove enough to justify her vilification. Helen's commodification, however, depends on the *removal* of this agency in order to facilitate her transformation into an effective token. If a woman has agency, then she blurs the line between masculine and feminine, complicating the roles of actor and acted-upon in a sexual economy. In order for the men to remain in control of the exchange of women and

resulting conferral of honor, renown, and thus masculinity, the divide between subject and object must remain clear. As such, vilification of Helen by way of framing her as an adulteress becomes secondary to removing her agency in order to reduce her to the simplest version of herself, transforming her into a symbolic token rather than a woman.

Epilogue

*“She is a theme of honour and renown,
A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds,
Whose present courage may beat down our foes
And fame in time to come canonise us.”*
— *Troilus and Cressida* II.ii.199-202

While Shakespeare’s and Marlowe’s portrayals of Helen probably garner the most attention as the products of prominent male playwrights in the Early Modern period, other writers of the time also explored Helen’s story in various other mediums. Notably, sixteenth century poet Isabella Whitney preceded both these authors in her similar perspective on Helen’s agency and blame. In her poem “I.W. To her Unconstant Lover,” published in 1567, Whitney composes an epistle reminiscent of Ovid’s *Heroides* in taking the perspective of a jilted lover. Throughout this poem, Whitney upends typical stories of classical heroism, problematizing the honorable remembrance of men such as Aeneas, Theseus, and Jason on the basis of their treatment of women. Despite her revision of these legends and prioritization of the female perspective, Whitney still vilifies Helen of Troy in the same style as Marlowe and Shakespeare. Like these later playwrights, Whitney categorizes Helen’s abduction as a rape, describing Paris as the one who “brought destruction unto Troy /all through the Grecian rape” (75-6). Further, she says of her partner’s other lover that “I rather wish her Helen’s face /than one of Helen’s trade: /With chasteness of Penelope” (97-99). In these lines, Whitney similarly vilifies Helen for her physicality, her beauty in her “face” and her sexuality, as emphasized by the contrast with Penelope’s chastity. Further, Whitney’s mention of Helen’s “trade” takes on a double meaning. On the one hand, given the context of this poem’s address to Whitney’s own unfaithful lover,

Helen's "trade" relates back to her sexuality, reminding us of her status as seductress or adulterer. Given Whitney's characterization of Helen's abduction as a "rape," however, these labels seem misplaced, thus aligning Helen's "trade" more closely with a slang use of the term that originated in the sixteenth century and which referred to prostitution as "the trade" (OED). This conceit of Helen-as-prostitute complicates the mechanics of the performative masculine economies in Early Modern texts.

While Shakespeare echoes Chaucer in jokes about Helen as prostitute, Marlowe omits this element from his text. Marlowe's Helen remains notably separate from the "courtesans" that Mephistopheles offers to Faustus, as Marlowe leaves her out of the list of comparisons between the courtesans and famed classical figures and instead introduces her much later in the play (II.1.149). Because of this omission, Marlowe can only vilify Helen indirectly, drawing from the strict moral structure of *Doctor Faustus* and her association with the demonic *eidolon* tradition, as well as Helen's role as the final catalyst of Faustus' damnation. Still, this seems like harsh treatment of a woman who speaks no lines and appears only fleetingly in spirit form, clearly lacking agency as far as any kind of "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 112). Shakespeare, then, in including the Helen-as-prostitute image, not only engages with Chaucer's text, but also revises Marlowe's logic. While Shakespeare similarly condemns Helen for her sexuality and physicality in Pandarus' song, he also uses the Chaucerian jokes about Helen as a sex worker to manipulate her role in the text's economy of masculinity, restoring some of her Homeric ambiguity.

Shakespeare both robs Helen of her agency in terming her abduction nonconsensual and returns it to her in positioning her as a prostitute, the only possibility for female action in the masculine economy. This position uniquely allows Helen to straddle the opposed realms of

object and actor in this economy, object in the commodification of her body, but actor in that she also participates in the economy as a seller, albeit of herself. As Juliana Schiesari notes in her analysis of Machiavelli's letter, "one of women's few possibilities of manipulating the symbolic to their advantage is to take the apparently contradictory position of being at once the object of exchange between men and the subject who is a trading partner in that exchange" (Schiesari 177). So, Shakespeare adds Helen's breach of the bounds of traditional passive femininity by becoming an economic actor to her list of transgressions, part of his attempt to make a stronger case for her vilification in his text. As Helen does not position herself as a prostitute, however, this categorization merely appears as one more male attribution of her value. It is Paris who calls Helen a "Nell" (III.i.119) and Pandarus who echoes Chaucer's pun in his repetition of "sweet queen, sweet queen, that's a sweet queen" (III.i.61). This continuous male valuation of Helen threatens the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" necessary for her agency, undermining the blame that Shakespeare tries to place upon her. Thus, the mechanics of the sexual economy that prevails in *Troilus and Cressida* render Helen's agency—or any woman's, for that matter—impossible.

Not only does Shakespeare's performative economy of masculinity remove the possibility of Helen's agency in the social context that it creates, it also erases her agency in transforming her from woman into token. Troilus' central question in the Trojan council scene, "What's aught but as 'tis valued?" calls attention to the consistent male assessment and reassessment of Helen's worth, and the dependence of her perceived value on the attributions of the men around her (II.ii.52). By extension, however, we might revise Troilus' question into one with even further reaching implications: what is Helen besides her prescribed value? Consequently, this question leaves us with the realization that Shakespeare's Helen is *nothing*

but her value as determined by men. In other words, because of the prevalence of the sexual economy in Shakespeare's work, Helen loses her personhood, womanhood, and even bodily existence in favor of an existence as a token, as a symbol to be transacted in this economy.

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